

THE SOVEREIGN POWER

BY MARK LEE LUTHER



Chapter XXVI.



It was inky black within; but, beside herself at her discovery, Ann rushed heedlessly forward, counting on the weak aid of the lamp in the far corridor when she should reach the turn of the passage. But no light, however faint, greeted her straining eyes. She was positive she had come far enough to see it if it still burned. Could a passing servant, a chance draft through the crazy vaulting, have blown it out? She halted panic-stricken. How far out of her way had she stumbled? What pitfall of the ruinous structure might not yawn at her feet?

Then, sharp in the stillness, came the scrape of a match and, far behind, a blue sulphurous point started out against the darkness and then, bursting into an orange flame, revealed Rodoslav's face. He looked unaccountably white thus presented, pale as a dead man, and with something of the rigidity of death in his features. He hurried her. Shrinking back against the damp stones, terrified lest he come upon her, yet not daring to flee, she watched his slow advance. Striking match after match, he came on, and then, a scant three yards distant, disappeared in the mouth of the passage she had entered.

Her relief was brief. He was now between her and her refuge. Finding her door unlocked, her room empty, he would stand before her threshold. If she delayed her coming he would return and search her out. Find her he would in the end. Even if she brought herself to risk the hellish region behind her, it would offer but a temporary haven. He would know every nook and cranny of the old place. It was better to go forward and face him. She would be near the others. If need arose, she could always flee. He would realize this. He would realize, she told herself, screwing her courage to its utmost, that if she felt along the wall to the fork in the way and so on, she knew not what. But the last inch of the return was no longer in total darkness. As before, a dim illumination filtered from the corridor. It was a different light this time, cutting the gloom at a different angle. It fell, fear told her before her feet could be certain, from her open door. He had pushed the door to its last extreme. He dared await her now and then.

Anger begot her courage. Her head held high in outrageous defiance, the eyes he had delighted to stare upon with contempt, her will, pliant no longer, equal to him and subjugate the will that had too long been a thing of her own, she crossed the threshold. But once again this strangest of men was to surprise her. The antagonist she had stooped herself to meet had vanished. Beside her bed, his face buried in its cushion, his shoulders convulsed, the joy of crushing grief, such another Rodoslav.

To Ann, who had won him in a hundred moods, this last phase was the most unnerving of all. Her towering anger collapsed in a instant, and, with face as white as his, her heart swelling, hysteria her master, she threw herself headlong down the corridor and beat still, upon her knees, the floor.

AFTER what seemed an eternity, Mrs. Blair addressed her. "Is it burglars?" she queried, still dragged with sleep. "Is the house afire?"

Ann flung up all upon her breast and wept with the abandon of a child and, like a child, begged incoherently to be taken home. The older woman mothered her in a way peculiar to her.

"But what is it, Deary? Why are you still dressed? What has frightened you?"

"It all frightens me!" sobbed Ann, clutching her nightgown.

"No wonder!" Aunt Helen's disapproving glance ranged the summer walls. "The place is fit only for owls and such wild creatures as those dancers. When you're married, don't ever let your husband coax you back here."

A fresh tempest of emotion shook Ann. "I'll never marry!" she declared.

"What?" "Marry?" She had awakened her listener at last.

"I'll never marry! I—I want to be a nun!"

Mrs. Blair perceived that she had to do with hysteria, and dealt with it firmly. "Be anything you choose," she said, "but don't give the Truscotts the idea that the place is haunted. If you must wail, do it in a pillow." She drew the girl to the bedside and sat down with her arms about her shoulders. "Let's hope they have done enough this hubbub," she added. "There

is no telling what Virginia's imagination would make of it."

"She couldn't make it more dreadful than it is. Nobody could!"

"There, there!" soothed the elder woman. "Molehills always look mountains at night. What's a lovers' quarrel? Just an excuse for the pleasure of making up."

Ann raised her head. "But I don't love him," she protested.

"You don't love Rodoslav?" Mrs. Blair was too startled to maintain the role of nurse. "What are you saying?"

"The truth. I've admired him, feared him; but as for loving—no, no!" Her shudder added its corroboration.

"But your engagement—"

"A sham."

"A sham engagement!" She brushed a bewildered hand across her eyes. "Doesn't the man want to marry you? Was all his devotion a pretense?"

"No, no; it's real—too real! I found that out tonight. It's his caring that makes everything so tragic."

"Tragic!"

"Yes. There is no other word." Ann bent before another gale of sobs as she recalled its tragedy. "Yet I

am to blame too," she asserted. "I wanted him to care. I could not rest until I made him care."

"Though you didn't love him!" Aunt Helen's face was blank. "I can't make head or tail of the affair."

"Poor Aunt!" Ann smiled wanly amid her distress. "You would call the whole story sheer madness, if you knew it. But I can't tell you—at least, not now. Some day you'll understand why I deceived you. It was for a great cause. I did it to help Rodoslav in—a great work. I was his ally, his shield— But I'm saying too much."

"It seems to me high time you made a clean breast of this business, Ann," said her aunt decisively. "You owe it to Justin and me, to say nothing of Oliver Page."

Ann lifted her eyes. "Why do you add Oliver?" she asked.

"Because, if you had had eyes for anybody but Rodoslav, you would have seen long ago that he loved you. Couldn't you realize that he is one man in a hundred?"

"Yes."

"We so hoped he would attract you, Justin and I! Perhaps—I don't know—perhaps we made it too plain. We both love him. He is so wholesome, so true! He is not a man to fear, Ann. He would not ask such things of you as—"

"Don't, don't!" implored the girl. "I don't need to be told what he is. I—I've seen it all for myself. If only— But I cannot explain. Don't ask me to explain, aunt dear. Only get me away from here. Take me away tomorrow. Say I'm ill—whatever you like—to the Truscotts. I can't spend another night, another day even, in this place. You must promise to do as I ask you!"

"I don't need to promise. Do you suppose I'd let you stay a minute longer than necessary after what you've told me? As for Rodoslav—"

"You must not act differently toward him," enjoined



Shrinking Back Against the Damp Stones. Not Daring to Flee. She Watched Him Come On and On.